

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

31 MARCH 2022

Exeter Clear Street Charter Review

1. History of the Charter.

1.1. The Clear Streets Charter started as an idea in 2016 and various versions were circulated but it never quite managed to find the right form to become adopted by the City or County Councils. Following a change in staff the charter was resurrected and revised in late 2017 and eventually became adopted by both authorities in 2018.

2. The aims of the Charter

2.1. The aim of the charter is very simple. It is to ensure that the streets, pavements and walkways of the city are kept free of clutter and obstacles and that they are accessible to people affected by sight loss or mobility issues. The charter sets out how the City Council and the County Council will work together to ensure that the city is as safe and obstacle free as possible. The charter was written with the support of the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and they have backed the charter.

2.2. The charter sets out a list of actions and commitments which include...

- Advertising boards – working with local businesses to make them realise how these can be challenging to blind people or those who are partially sighted.
- Street furniture – carrying out regular audits to ensure this is safe and appropriately placed to allow safe navigation around
- New developments – proactive engagement with blind and partially sighted people around the design and development
- Rubbish and recycling bins – ensuring these are within the curtilage of the property, wherever possible

A copy of the charter is attached as appendix 1.

3. Who does what?

3.1. The charter lists a number of actions which are cross boundary for both the City and County Councils. The table below gives a brief summary of who manages which issue, the list is not exhaustive.

| Item | Responsible Body |
|----------|---|
| A Boards | A Boards are managed under highway legislation buy the Highway Authority who are the County Council |

| | |
|--|--|
| Street Furniture | Generally the City Council on our own land for things such as benches, bollards etc. County Council for street furniture on the public highway and for highways and transport related street furniture (signs, traffic lights, lighting columns etc.) |
| Pavement Licences for cafés on the public highway. | Previously managed by the City Council but now managed by the County Council |
| Wheeled bins and refuse / recycling bags | City Council |
| Street Works | County Council |
| Parking on Pavements | County Council |
| Overhanging shrubbery and branches | County Council if it's affecting the public highway. City Council if it's council owned property |
| Planning and new developments | City Council |

4. Advertising Boards

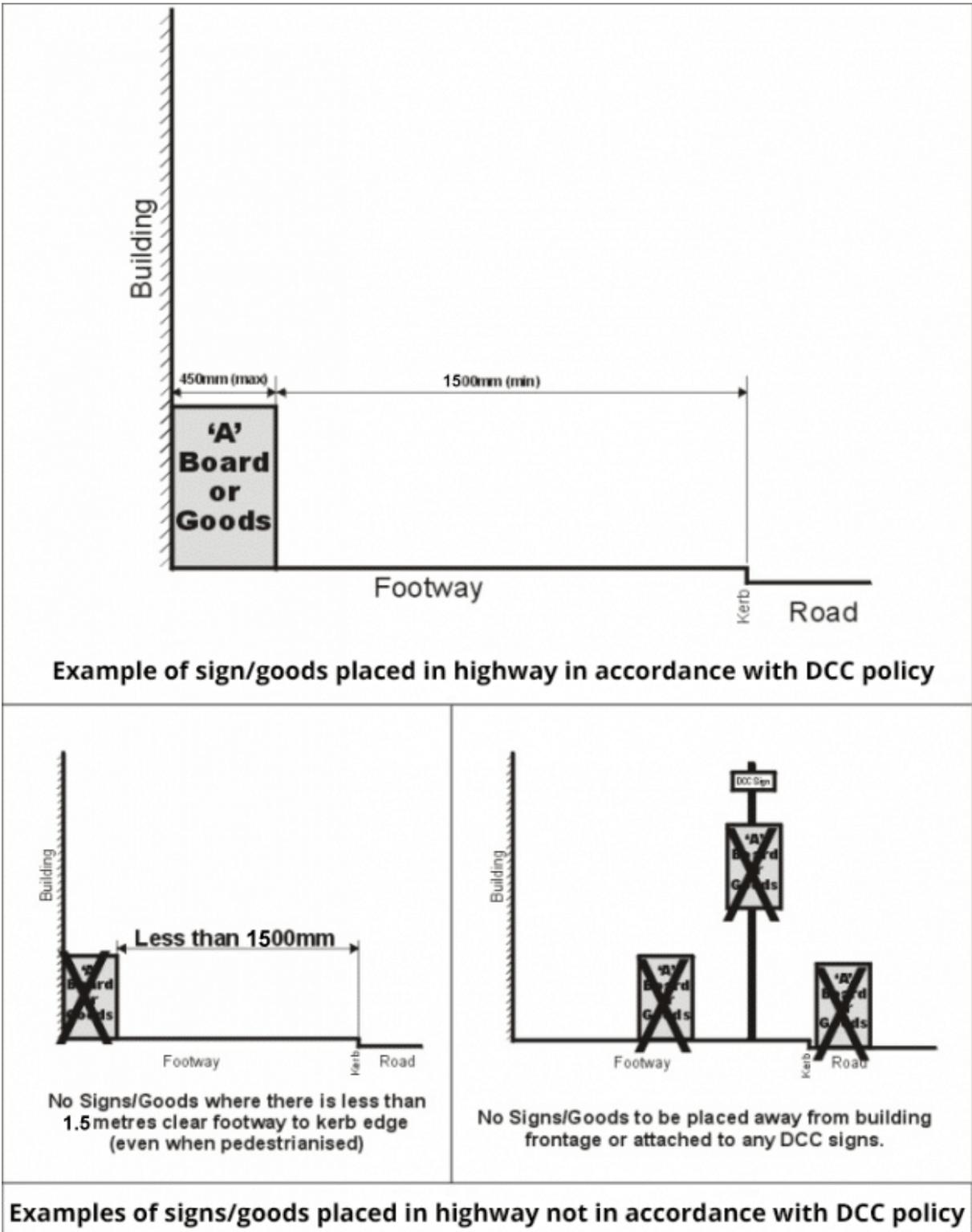
4.1. The highest profile issue is advertising boards (A Boards) which are one of the most common day to day annoyances for disabled people in the streets of Exeter. A Boards are managed under highway legislation by the County Council as Highway Authority. It should be noted that no business has a right to put an obstruction on the public highway but the county and city councils recognise the need for businesses to advertise, especially in the current climate. A tolerant approach is therefore taken and businesses are allowed to put A Boards directly outside their property subject to certain rules.

4.2. The rules for A boards are...

- They must allow a minimum width of passage of 1.5 meters
- They must extend no more than 450mm from the shop frontage
- They must not force pedestrians into the road either directly or because of the number of pedestrians.

The guidance from the DCC website is included in the image over the page.

Image 1: Guidance on A Boards from the Devon County Council Website.



4.3. The issue of the Street Charter and specifically A Boards was raised at the recent Highway and Traffic Orders Committee (HATOC) where the Neighbourhood Highway Manager advised...

'Prior to the Covid pandemic a significant survey was undertaken to identify A boards and furniture causing obstructions on footways in the centre of Exeter in the middle of the day. These companies, in most cases, were spoken to face to face and handed a letter reminding them of their responsibilities. Where this was not possible, letters were sent. This action was successful and it was clear that companies were content to comply with the requirements.

An issue which became apparent was that a number of properties had street furniture on narrow sections of footways authorised by Exeter City Council, who have delegated powers to license Street Cafes. We discussed this issue with the City Council and I believe they were going to review those licenses. Subsequently during the Covid pandemic recovery, second tier authorities have been given additional powers to license pavement furniture.

The licensing of street furniture has now been handed back to DCC from ECC so going forward there should be further clarity in terms of responsibility and approval.

Due to the reduced levels of pedestrian activity following the lock down, there has been a reluctance to enforce too strongly the promotion of businesses in the city centre. Where a safety defect has been caused by such furniture, this will have been recorded and acted upon during regular safety inspections, which vary in their timings, and the inspection of ad hoc reports, in accordance with policy.

With levels of pedestrian activity increasing we have recently discussed a targeted inspection in the city centre to identify and remove such obstructions. This approach is supported by local members we will arrange for this to take place shortly'.

It would appear that enforcement action is generally not required and businesses comply when asked.

5. Design of the City Centre public realm

5.1. One of the City Councils most important contributions to the charter is the design of public open spaces. No two visually impaired people see the world in the same way but there are common themes and good practice. Contrast is one key element, for example a contrast in the colour of paving where there is a change of level, or the contrast of street furniture against the paving it is set in, all helps. Our relationship with the RNIB and the experience that they have brought has helped us to learn and improve our designs.

- 5.2. In a similar vein, the needs of people with impaired mobility are also extremely diverse but with careful design and by following best practice we can make our public areas and public buildings as friendly as possible to everyone. These principles have been adopted on our recent developments at the bus station and St Sidwells point and will be continued for the development of CityPoint.
- 5.3. Efforts to reduce street clutter are also helpful, sign poles, bus shelters, service cabinets all cause obvious obstructions or constrictions to people with visual or mobility impairments. Their relative positioning and number should be carefully considered by all parties.

6. Summary

- 6.1. The Clear Streets Charter is working well with the City Council and County Council officers actively engaged on keeping our streets safe. It does however require constant vigilance to maintain. Fortunately we have constant eyes in the City Centre in the form of our street cleansing crews who know to flag up issues to their supervisors for action or to simply move dangerously placed A Boards when they see them. The day to day presence of our staff and the more targeted audits by the County Council seem to be an effective combination and keep this important charter live and current in our priorities.

Report Author

David Bartram 07/03/2022